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AUTHOR	Lin, Chia-Hui
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this Digest is to explore the evidence suggesting the effectiveness of literacy instruction through communicative and visual arts. It discusses the communicative and visual arts in literacy instruction; television and multiple media as instructional tools; using dramatic activities in language arts classrooms; and teaching language arts through comics. It concludes that when educators expand their methods of literacy instruction to include television, drama, multimedia, comics and other formats, they may be able to reach more students in the language arts classroom and better meet students' different learning styles than would be the case using purely traditional teaching methods. (Contains 17 references.) (RS)

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Literacy Instruction through Communicative and Visual Arts

by Chia-Hui Lin

What are Communicative and Visual Arts in Literacy Instruction?

The purpose of this Digest is to explore the evidence suggesting the effectiveness of literacy instruction through communicative and visual arts. According to Flood, Heath, and Lapp (1997), visual arts includes everything from dramatic performances, comic books, to television viewing. The communicative arts, such as reading, writing, and speaking, exist as integrated elements in the visual arts. These authors argued that using visual arts in literacy instruction motivates students to become involved in the communicative arts. By taking visual arts away from the communicative arts in the classroom, schools would grow away from the fundamental skills that adults need to function in society.

Television and Multiple Media as Instructional tools

Television viewing occupies a significant portion of students' lives. Starting from preschool, American children spend more time watching television than any other activity (Anderson, Field, Collins, Lorch, & Nathan, 1985, as cited in Broek, 2001; Huston, Wright, Rice, Kerkman, & St. Peters, 1987, as cited in Broek, 2001). Despite various negative effects associated with television viewing, several studies demonstrate that TV can be an effective tool in literacy instruction.

For very young children, some studies suggest there is an overlap between children's pre-reading television viewing and their later reading skills. The results reveal that children who were good at comprehending materials presented via TV were also good at comprehending materials presented aurally (Broek, 2001). Research also showed that viewing educational television programs may be beneficial to young children's literacy learning. The evaluation of the television series *Between the Lions* on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) indicated that the kindergarteners who watched this series significantly outperformed their non-viewing peers on the tasks of word knowledge, concepts of print, phonemic awareness, and letter-sound knowledge (Strickland & Rath, 2000).

For older students, incorporating TV into reading instruction may motivate reluctant readers and result in improved reading fluency. Koskinen, Wilson, and Jensema (1985) used closed-captioned television programs with 35 second through sixth grade remedial readers in an exploratory study. The anecdotal evidence indicated that closed-captioned programs were effective in promoting the learners' reading fluency. In Goldman and Goldman's study (1988), the audio portion of TV programs were turned off and the high school remedial students were motivated to read the captions in order to understand the story.

Two recent studies show that multimedia can also be an effective instructional tool in the language arts classroom. One fourth grade teacher used television/videos in conjunction with texts, using computers for information and writing, and other reading/writing instruction (e.g., book clubs) to engage students in a language arts unit (Lapp, Flood, & Fisher, 1999). Students' reading comprehension and attention span increased, content knowledge was reinforced, and students had more aesthetic responses. Jester (2002) incorporated reading, writing, and grammar lessons with multimedia for a book report presentation in a sixth grade language arts classroom. The multimedia presentation helped students organize ideas more clearly, provided students with easier methods for revision and editing, allowed students to differentiate between words and ideas through the use of color and fonts, and sustained students' attention longer than traditional media.

Using Dramatic Activities in Language Arts Classrooms

Using dramatic activities as an instructional tool in the language arts classroom is based on the principle that drama directly involved the child, and an involved child would be interested in learning (Smith, 1972). The following studies document the effectiveness of incorporating dramatic activities into the language arts curriculum.

McMaster (1998) reviewed research studies regarding the use of drama in literacy education and found that drama is an effective medium for literacy development in nine areas. First, students develop affect through drama. Drama creates motivation for students to participate and facilitates students' responses in reading instruction. Second, dramatization is a source of scaffolding for emergent readers by providing rich background experiences for future reading. Third, dramatization leads students to develop symbolic representation, which is the same concept children require in order to understand the alphabetic principle. Fourth, dramatic activities provide students a meaningful environment where they can practice oral reading repeatedly to develop fluency. Fifth, new vocabularies presented in the drama context provide students opportunities to acquire the meanings visually, aurally, and kinesthetically. Sixth, drama helps students acquire the knowledge of word order, phrasing, and punctuation that contribute to the meaning of a written sentence. Seventh, drama activities help students read different forms of discourse, especially in familiarizing children with nonfiction. Eighth, students monitor their own comprehension in drama and develop effective reading strategies. Ninth, teachers can use drama as an assessment

tool since it provides immediate feedback about students' understanding of new reading materials.

For adolescents, dramatic activities provide meaningful contexts and motivation to practice literacy use. Worthman (2002) explored the writing done by a teen theater ensemble and showed that the aesthetic activities provided adolescents opportunities to see writing as a means for communication other than solitary practice. Ferree (2001) documented how two British secondary language arts teachers engaged students with literature by producing soap operas. During the production, teachers engaged students in various language usages, spelling and writing instruction. Students were motivated to participate because they had ownership over the product. Students also had opportunities to study realistic materials, use technology, learn actively, and to collaborate with peers in the production process.

Dramatic activities also provide scaffolding for effective literacy instruction in elementary and English-as-a-second language classrooms. O'Day (2001) wrote that scaffolded play with elementary students allowed them to participate actively in their language learning. Students were motivated to organize, rewrite, discuss and perform the play. Morado, Koenig, and Wilson (1999) interwove literature, drama, music, and movement together into miniperformances for at-risk kindergarten, first-, and second-grade students. Teachers engaged students with literature, explored and experimented with story elements in the class, and affirmed children's language while deciding with students on words to use in the performances. Rossi (2000) examined the use of an opera project with Spanish-English bilingual first graders. Children's own cultural experiences were valued in the project and many multi-model contexts were provided for children to learn language and develop literacy in supportive and meaningful environments.

Teaching Language Arts through Comics

Comic books have been the reading materials for children since the 1930s (Morrison, Bruan, & Chilcoat, 2002), and because of their popularity among students, several researchers investigated the effectives of using comic books to engage students in language arts classroom.

Wright and Sherman (1999) argued that teachers should use comic strips in language arts classrooms for three reasons. First, their study revealed a high level of interest in the genre. Second, the wide circulation of comic strips makes them an economically viable source of material. Third, most comic strips have low readability levels, with words and sentences which are linguistically suitable for elementary and middle school readers. In an earlier study, Goldstein (1986) described a project using cartoons and comics in vocabulary instruction.

Transparencies were made of the cartoons and comics to share with students. Students kept notebooks, journals, or vocabulary cards for the new vocabularies they learned from the comic and cartoons. Positive results were indicated by teacher and parent observation and students' improvement in standardized test scores.

Conclusion

As technology advances, new ways of transmitting knowledge are developing rapidly. When we expand our methods of literacy instruction by including TV, drama, multimedia, comics, and other formats, we may be able to reach more students in the language arts classroom and meet students' different learning styles than would be the case using purely traditional teaching methods.

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Chia-hui Lin is User Services Coordinator at the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication. She is also a doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the Indiana University School of Education, Bloomington.

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